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COOPERATIVE FUND of New England

Borrower Profile: Handwork - Ithaca's Cooperative Craft Store

There would be no Handwork without the members," says Carol Schmook, manager of this co-operative craft store in Ithaca, NY. "It is the members and their work that define who we are."

In 1976, twelve friends got together to explore marketing their artwork together. Each put in \$100 to cover the first month's rent on a storefront and to build some simple displays for their work. Carol joined the co-op a couple of years later.

Today, Handwork has over 30 members, each of whom also works in the store on a regular basis. The co-op has average annual sales of about \$600,000 and has become an institution in Ithaca.

In 2000, the co-op purchased its own building, which quickly became an arts center in downtown Ithaca. Tenants in the building included a dance company and a print-making co-op.

"Handwork is a tradition in the community," says Carol. "The members bring their connections to the business. Their friends and family come to see their artwork in the store, and in the process get to see other members' work." Artists offer presentations at the co-op and also teach classes in the community.

A Challenge & An Opportunity

A devastating fire in the building was a test for the co-operative, but it was also an opportunity. Members quickly got together to discuss what to do. They rented a temporary storefront so that the artists could continue to market their products while they set to

work rebuilding. A member committee was established to oversee the design of a new space. It was the first time the group had the chance to think about what an ideal store would look like.

"It wasn't nice to have a fire, but it gave us a chance to think differently," says Carol. "And people are amazed by the new store."

Co-operative Connections

When Handwork needed a loan to help with remodeling expenses, they came to the Co-operative Fund of New England. Carol remembers that "just knowing that the line of credit was there, and that there was a group out there that cared about how we're doing made a big difference," says Carol.

The experience also reminded her of why she originally got involved with the co-operative: "I started out at Handwork because I really liked the idea of being in a co-op. And now we know that we're part of this bigger movement and community, and that's been very positive." By borrowing from the Fund, Handwork is also ensuring that other co-ops and community organizations will be able to access financial support in the future.

For more information on Handwork Cooperative and to see members' artwork, visit their website at www.handwork.coop. And to learn more about co-ops and how you can help build a more co-operative economy, please visit www.coopfund.coop. —Profile by Erbin Crowell



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